

## FEATURES

### 46 THE 10 MOST INFLUENTIAL ARTISTS OF 2002

They're the people who are ruling the charts, changing the music industry and turning heads. From the new R&B sensation Alicia Keys (p46) to the back-to-basics rock & roll of the Strokes (p48); the global assault of Melbourne's the Avalanches (p50) to the beats-laden tracks of Basement Jaxx (p52). There's goddess of rock & roll PJ Harvey (p54) and the mistress of all things hip-hop, Missy Elliott (p56). Creed (p58) assume the biggest rock band in the world title, while Air (p60) set the mood. Eminem (p62) proves that white boys can rap, and...

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The most talked-about rock band of the year - from London to Los Angeles - comes from the suburbs of Sydney. Who exactly are the Vines? Simon Wooldridge finds out.

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**"THEY WERE TERRIBLE, THEY BARELY FINISHED A SONG... BUT THERE WAS SOMETHING ABOUT IT, HIS VOICE WAS INCREDIBLE AND THE IDEAS WERE REALLY AMAZING"**

- THE VINES, PAGE 76



# NEVER HEARD OF THE VINES? YOU WILL

They've been called the Beatles-meets-Nirvana; Australia's answer to the Strokes. They're the hottest band on the planet right now, and they're yet to release a record. Story by Simon Wooldridge.

**THE** Vines are the Words of the Day. They've actually been the word for over a year, when it was announced in December 2001 that the Sydney-based band had signed directly to Capitol Records in the United States – despite only releasing a home-made cassingle, and having played just a handful of pub shows. Since then, the hype percolated steadily as the trio prepared their debut album, *Highly Evolved* (due out July 1), recorded late last year with producer Rob Schnapf (Beck, Guided By Voices, Foo Fighters and Elliott Smith). The UK press got a sniff of something promising via the UK-only Rex Records seven-inch single “The Factory”, released late October and passed up by word-of-mouth to the *NME* powers by Rex label boss and occasional Avalanches’ publicist Leo Silverman. The seven-inch was named single of the week, the band was heralded as the “Australian Strokes”.

So, without a full-scale release in the UK, and with the title track of *Highly Evolved* being flagged pre-release by radio, the Vines are enjoying a sold-out first run of dates in England. At a roadside greasy spoon somewhere between Nottingham and Bristol, the Vines’ 23-year-old singer/songwriter Craig Nicholls is on the cusp of a wave. And a pesky journalist is trying to uncover when the frontman first felt the welling momentum that has brought the band to this point. Unaccustomed to the interview process, his answers are rambling, vague and punctuated with the phrase, “It’s really fun, really cool.” You get the feeling Nicholls will have the hang of it very shortly.

“It’s about a couple of years ago, I can’t really tell – maybe about three years ago,” he says, trying to explain when ‘it really took off’. “I think it was four years ago, but we were just in a rehearsal room and weren’t really going anywhere. That’s how I’d choose to answer this question: about four years ago, writing songs and stuff. I thought it was cool and I really enjoyed it.”

The Vines formed around three high school friends – Nicholls, bassist Patrick Matthews and by now ex-drummer David Olliffe – who’d previously bummed around southern Sydney enclaves like Arncliffe and Oatley, and even worked together at McDonald’s, before assembling the band. Nicholls recalls playing at parties in friends’ garages, the early line-up of songs including a few You Am I covers thrown in. “Maybe two years after that we got an interview on FBi Radio, ‘cause we knew someone there,” he says. “They played one demo song we recorded ourselves. Our managers [Andy Kelly and Pete Lusty of Winterman & Goldstein], they liked it, they came and saw us play and they wanted to manage us, and then passed our demos around. So we got to go to America and make our album, ‘cause that’s what we wanted to do. I’ve always wanted to make an album ever since I started songwriting.”

Hang on, he’s left a bit out. Having management does not automatically gain you an international record deal. This is where Engine Room general manager Todd Wagstaff comes in. Based at Sydney’s inner-south suburb of Alexandria, Engine Room is a boutique operation aimed at signing and on-selling artists to major labels worldwide. They’re best known here as publishers and co-record label for Lash (“Don’t throw things at us,” Wagstaff – whose business partner is Andrew Klippel – jokes of the vilification of the all-girl three-piece, often referred to as “Scandal’ash”), but Engine Room has a number of projects on the boil. They’re working with *Neighbours*’ Holly Valance as she embarks on an international

pop career, as well as the more serious muso Carla Werner, who is recording with Gomez and Coldplay producer Ken Nelson.

After W&G signed the Vines mid 2000, the ex-RooArt A&R man and You Am I manager Wagstaff chanced upon them at a gig supporting bands of affiliated label Ivy League. “They were terrible,” Wagstaff recalls, “they barely finished a song, he [Nicholls] knocked his amp over, fell offstage. But it was kind of fall-down beautiful, there was something about it; his voice was incredible and the ideas were really amazing. So we pursued Winterman & Goldstein for a demo tape.”

This 20-song demo turned his head “instantly”. “By the time I got to songs eight, nine and 10 I realised it was of staggering importance. I then listened to the demo nearly all night long, and we gave them a contract the next day.”

In June 2001, Wagstaff took the demos to London, where he shopped these artists to company connections. Initial interest from Parlophone EMI flowed on to a meeting with EMI A&R in the US. The turning point came when Andy Slater, the newly appointed president at EMI subsidiary Capitol Records, and ex-producer and manager for Fiona Apple, Macy Gray and the Wallflowers, joined the band in a studio recording session.

“He hadn’t heard any demos,” says Wagstaff, “he was just there at the request of his head of A&R he came into the studio listened to three songs. He had a huge grin on his face and was just devastated by what he heard. His initial reaction was that they would change the face of radio formats in America.”

Wagstaff credits Slater with breaking a 10-year US drought for Kylie Minogue, whose *Fever* album has conquered the previously elusive *Billboard* charts. With his support, and that of former Polygram chiefs David Munns and Alain Levy (who’ve replaced Ken Berry as EMI vice-chairman and CEO respectively), the future of the Vines is very bright indeed. “At this point the Vines would be the number-one priority new artist for EMI for the world,” says Wagstaff.

With Engine Room having paid for 100 per cent of the album’s recording, Wagstaff admits there has been an element of serendipity in the band’s roller coaster ride of success. “The managers respected the fact that [the music] was brilliant; that it has happened so quick has come as a surprise,” he offers, “and has a lot to do with the fact that what the world wants just collided with what these guys do, in that people seem to be looking for a ‘classic revisitation’.”

As for the record? Well, it’s pretty good. As Wagstaff suggests, it’s not so much a matter of being the future of rock as a revisitation of classic eras. When Nicholls speaks of UK influences, it’s Supergrass, Suede and Swervedriver; reviewers hear more distant inspiration. While the opening salvos will be the one-and-a-half minute title track, the raved-up rocker first single “Get Free” and the Beatles-esque “Factory”, there’s plenty of mid-paced melodrama at the album’s heart. Importantly, they rock live and Nicholls has stage presence – recently marked as “the missing link between (the Strokes’) Julian Casablancas, Danny Goffey and Evan from *The Secret Life Of Us*.” And, perhaps the key to the success is the sense that this band takes itself, and its art, quite seriously.

“We started doing our own stuff – it really has taken over me,” says Nicholls. “It’s really cool, it’s good fun. I’m glad we’ve made an album, because I’ve had it in my head for a long time that that’s what the goal was.” ●



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THE VINES (L-R): PATRICK MATTHEWS,  
CRAIG NICHOLLS, DAVID OLLIFFE

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